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ABSTRACT

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers are the most educationally disadvantaged group in society, with over 70% high school dropouts and 15% functionally illiterate. Mobility, language barriers, and cultural differences combined with health and nutrition problems have a negative effect on school achievement. The constant interruption of the educational process leads to confusion, frustration, and a feeling of alienation. This alienation becomes the major factor contributing to dropping out among migrant and seasonal farmworker students. The High School Equivalency Program (HEP), established in 1967, offers more supportive components than traditional General Education Development (GED) programs. The Office of Migrant Education was established in 1980 and presently directs the 22 HEP programs functioning in the continental United States and Puerto Rico. The HEP projects have become a unique blend of education, social, personal, civic, career, and cultural experiences. The institutions of higher education and the non-profit organizations granted funds to run HEP projects are encouraged to design programs based on the needs of local migrant and seasonal farmworkers and the institution's unique areas of strength. An average of 3,000 students are served annually, but this is a minimal figure compared to the number of dropouts. All HEP projects provide instructional support services geared toward helping students pass the GED test and motivating students to pursue postsecondary education or training. The projects have these major components: (1) an active recruitment program; (2) tutoring; (3) counseling; and (4) access to culturally enriching opportunities. (ALL)

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# MIGRANT AND SEASONAL FARMWORKERS

## A FORGOTTEN POPULATION

by

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**Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers,**
**A Forgotten Population**

In March of 1990, educators concerned by the increased number of students dropping out before completing high school met in Nashville, Tennessee, for the 1990 National Dropout Prevention Conference. This author traveled from Knoxville, pleased that her conference presentation proposal had been accepted and eager to share the experiences gained during the last three years as administrator of a retrieval program for migrant seasonal farmworker dropouts. Her excitement turned into disappointment when only one person, from the thousands attending the conference, attended her presentation. Looking back, it becomes evident that the term "migrant education" should not have been used as a presentation descriptor. Previous experience should have taught us that the educational needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers dropout students are not prominent in the education agenda of the nation.

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers have been an invisible group to most of society (Ford, 1988). They are, by definition, families on the move with little time to establish community ties. They live in isolation even when they live in high density areas (Prewitt-Diaz, 1990). They are hardly noticed by most community members when they stop to work on local farms. For the most part, their needs, problems, dreams and aspirations are kept hidden and go unmet and unfulfilled.

On Thanksgiving Day of 1961, Edward R. Murrow presented a documentary entitled "Harvest of Shame." This documentary exposed to the nation the poor and unsanitary conditions under which migrants were living across the nation's farmland. This documentary made a great impact, ruining the Thanksgiving celebrations for some and awakening in others the desire to do something. The most significant impact of the documentary resulted in several pieces of

legislation directed toward improving the plight of migrants. These legislations have given birth to programs such as migrant health clinics, Migrant Headstart, Farmworker Opportunities organizations and a division of Migrant Education within the U.S. Department of Education.

Still, migrant and seasonal farmworkers are the most educationally disadvantaged group in our society (Hodgkinson, 1985; Dement, 1985). During the last century America has carried out a grand experiment in universal, free, public education. However, the system has served well only those who are white, middle to upper income, well motivated and from stable families. Mobility, language and cultural differences experienced at each end of the migration streams combine with health and nutrition problems to have a negative effect on school achievement. The constant interruption of the educational process leads to confusion, frustration and a feeling of alienation (Brewer and Richards, 1988). This feeling on alienation, in turn, becomes the major factor in migrant and seasonal farmworker students becoming school dropouts.

Statistics reveal that over 70 percent of the migrants have not completed high school and 15 percent are functionally illiterate (Hodgkinson, 1985). The dropout rates for migrant students far exceed the rate for the rest of the school age population. As a response to Murrow's documentary, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 included educational provisions for migrant children in an effort to alleviate their educational barriers. In 1967, Tittle III of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was amended to provide financial resources to remedy, as much as possible, the gaps and the unbalanced educational opportunities faced by migrant students. That same year the administrator for the Office of Economic Opportunities created a dropout retrieval program for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. The High School Equivalency Program (HEP) started as a pilot project at Catholic University in

Washington, D.C. The intent was to implement a program that would provide farmworker youth with an experience which would have economic opportunity "pay-offs." The increased mechanization of agricultural labor, which had greatly raised productivity, had steadily reduced demand for agricultural workers. Most former initiatives were directed to employment problems and provided income maintenance (particularly during periods of seasonal unemployment) and other supportive services. However, during the 1960's and 1970's, the federal government began to experiment with strategies to provide permanent solutions to the employment problems of seasonal farmworkers and their educational needs.

The idea of developing a program such as HEP was to offer far more supportive components than traditional GED programs. Funding, in the form of grants, was made available to institutions of higher education and non-profit organizations to develop HEP projects. Twelve projects were implemented in 1968, fifteen in 1969 and seventeen in 1972. Today there are twenty-two programs in continental USA and Puerto Rico.

In 1980, Section 303 of the Department of Education Organization Act (DEDA), transferred to the Secretary of Education the responsibility for the HEP projects. The "Act" further required the establishment, within the newly created department, of a single component to be responsible for the administration and coordination of programs related to the education of migrants, giving birth to the Office of Migrant Education. "Harvest of Hope" became the motto for the programs developed by the office.

Under the direction of the Office of Migrant Education the HEP projects have become a unique blend of education, social, personal, civic, career and cultural experiences. The institutions of higher education and the non-profit organizations granted funds to run HEP projects are encouraged to design programs based on the needs of local migrant and seasonal farmworkers and the

institution's unique areas of strength. An average of 3,000 students are served yearly. The programs offer an alternative to the unending cycle of poverty and illiteracy found often within the migrant and seasonal farmworker population but the number of students served is minimal compared to the number of dropouts.

All HEP projects provide instructional supportive services geared toward a successful completion of the General Education Development (GED) test. Emphasis is placed on creating the appropriate environment to motivate the students to continue their education and enroll in postsecondary education or training programs. The grantees are given freedom to design flexible and creative programs. Models that are best suited to the size and reach of the program, the density and distribution of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the state, and the areas of strength of the institution are used. Some programs are residential only, some are commuter only, some combine residential, commuter and home study designs.

A variable and flexible delivery system is required to serve a hard to reach population such as this. Each project design includes an active recruitment program. The average potential student resides in a rural, isolated community, lacks private or public transportation and has limited access to most social services. Prewitt-Diaz (1990) has said that "the culture of migrancy fosters its own continuance and is, in many ways, counterproductive to education" (p.28). Recruiting students to participate in HEP projects sometimes means getting involved with the extended family system to gain their respect and approval.

Tutoring, counseling and access to culturally enriching opportunities are major components of the projects. Each project employs qualified counselors who assist the student with personal and educational decisions. Residential programs provide cultural and social activities to help the student develop social skills.

Commuter programs focus on helping the student assimilate into the local community and on teaching better use of the already available resources.

Once the student completes the requirements and passes the GED test the goal is to place the student in post secondary education programs or competitive employment. A sister program to HEP, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) assists some of the college bound students. Also funded by the Department of Education, CAMP provides financial and supportive services during the first year of college to HEP graduates and migrant and seasonal farmworker high school graduates. Only six CAMP projects have been funded--not enough to meet the needs of this growing populations.

**Conclusion**

A recent ethnography (Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter II and Rivera, 1990) suggested the existence of "a culture of migrancy." As a focus of research, the migrant and seasonal farmworker is a virgin population. Most programs addressing the educational needs of high school dropouts serve stable populations in urban areas. The few programs designed to serve migrant and seasonal farmworkers receive little acknowledgement and are not enough to meet the need. Further research is needed to define and explore the characteristics and consequences of the "culture of migrancy" in order to design programs to better meet their needs. Existing programs should make an effort to understand, reach and serve this forgotten population. Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" documentary opened the eyes of the nation to the needs of migrants and seasonal farmworkers; this article intends to bring back into focus their educational needs.

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